Essay 1: My Vision for This Course

I've examined several possible textbooks for this course, without being satisfied. In many cases, a textbook requires you to read too much 'extra' information to get at what I want you to study. Instead, I'll be writing a series of essays that highlight some big ideas. These essays will overlap with the lectures in EDUC 381 Large Group and Block 1. These essays will also introduce some other ideas, or go deeper into ideas from the lectures. These essays may not be as polished as published readings, but you will only have to read ideas that I believe are important.

Like the lectures, these essays will only provide an introduction to some big ideas. If these ideas interest you, I encourage you to continue studying them far beyond this course.

This first essay, I will give you some background about how I approach teaching this course, and an introduction to many of the big ideas in this course.

Teaching is Important & Challenging

Teaching is one of the central, vital activities of civilization. Education prepares an individual to take advantage of opportunities in order to achieve the good life—through a successful career and through financial security, and also through self-awareness, growth, wellness, and a vibrant intellectual and creative life. Education nurtures a free market democracy, by preparing citizens to be productive entrepreneurs and employees, to be informed, responsible voters, and to be producers and consumers of intellectual and creative works.

Teaching is challenging, because understanding humans is challenging. Humans are complex. Individuals vary widely in their development, backgrounds, dispositions, current and desired identities, strengths and weaknesses, and more. This challenge is even greater because of practical limitations. For example, while one-on-one teaching has many advantages, financial limitations mean most teachers have many students, and most students have many teachers. Thus, teaching involves constantly balancing principles with pragmatism.

So teaching is important and challenging. Many smart people have tried to understand and change the process of education. Most educators agree that there is a process—that as teachers, our choices influence how and what our students learn. Different educators have suggested different ways of looking at the process, with different perspectives, models, predictions, and prescriptions. Some of these ideas are compelling and supported by empirical evidence, but our understanding of humans, learning, and education is still very incomplete. Even when we understand something, it can be hard to change how we teach (e.g., because of practical limitations). Also, educators continue to generate new ideas and new evidence, so we must be willing and able to adjust our understanding throughout our careers.
These circumstances lead to two of the big ideas in this course. First, each of us must construct our own understanding through **active reflection**. We must do more than remember and repeat, more than observe and describe. We must make specific choices about strategies, beliefs, and priorities—choices about how we will teach. Second, we must **respect complexity**. We must wisely deal with the complexity of teaching and understanding humans, including the continuous evolution of ideas and the enormous differences among our students. We must reject simple or rigid rules or ideas, because humans are complex. We must make our understanding and our teaching flexible and adaptive.

**Teaching Identity & Teaching Voice**

You can use active reflection and respecting complexity to continue developing your teaching identity. Your teaching identity includes your background, abilities, and beliefs. Perhaps more importantly, it includes your **perspectives**: the ways in which you view students and the process of education, including lenses, models, and metaphors. You have a teaching identity, but you may not have reflected on it a lot. This course can help you be more thoughtful and deliberate in developing your teaching identity.

One part of your teaching identity is your teaching voice. This includes how you present yourself to and interact with students, including verbal and nonverbal communication, and the **language** you use. It also includes presentation and interaction with parents/guardians, colleagues, supervisors, and more.

One part of developing your teaching voice is developing **literacy and fluency** with the jargon of education—the special vocabulary educators use. You need to know the jargon to be able to efficiently search for information, to effectively converse with colleagues and supervisors, and to benefit more from conferences and workshops.

**Self-Study**

Self-study is a powerful way to be more aware of your teaching identity, including your desired identity. Self-study involves **examining your knowledge, skills, and dispositions about teaching**. It can also involve trying to change your teaching identity; even the act of **examination** may change your identity.

Self-study is more powerful if you have or develop certain abilities, including using models and metaphors, thinking critically and reflectively, and finding interesting problems and generating creative solutions.

**Transparent Teaching**

Teaching is complex. One of the best ways to learn to teach is by studying more experienced teachers. I practice something called transparent teaching. Throughout this course, I'll be sharing examples and stories from my teaching and research. I also welcome questions about my teaching: you can **ask about anything**, including the...
choices I make in teaching this course. Provided a question is sincere and respectful, I will try to answer sincerely and honestly. You can ask questions in class or more privately.

You may not like my choices or my answers. I don't present myself as a perfect teacher. Rather, I hope you find studying my teaching useful in developing your own teaching identity.

**Human Equity**

Teaching is a central, vital activity in our civilization, partly because it preserves and transmits our cultures and our values. We should be thoughtful about the values we transmit to our students. For example, teaching can be a force for social justice, when we promote human equity.

Human equity is a complex set of issues, including **exceptional needs** (e.g., dyslexia), **learner variability**, and **discrimination**. Every teacher has a professional and moral obligation to be aware of, address, and promote human equity. I urge you to make this obligation a central part of your teaching identity. For example, in developing your teaching voice, **audit your language**. Only use words like “retarded,” “gay,” and “pimp” in their proper contexts.

Many human equity issues overlap with other issues in education. For example, some models of learning processes make generalizations about students’ abilities—these **generalizations may not apply** to students identified with exceptional needs. Human equity issues should profoundly shape your teaching. Human equity should not just be something you think about for one semester (e.g., in EDUC 351).

**Technology**

Using technology is a central part of my teaching identity. I urge you to make using technology a central part of your teaching identity. Like human equity, educational technology should not just be something you think about for one semester (e.g., EDUC 331).

That doesn't mean you need to become a geek like me. However, I will be using a lot of technology in teaching this course. When we try to apply ideas from educational psychology, **the best prescriptions sometimes include technology**. I urge you to think about how technology affects your learning, and how you can use technology in your teaching.

Some assignments will include assessing your use of technology. If you're ill-prepared to use technology, I recommend planning ahead on these assignments and getting help (e.g., from peers, from me, from the IRES 331 instructor).
Exposure: “No Thank You Bites”

The most important idea about your teaching identity is that it must be your identity. This course will expose you to many elements you can include in your identity: ideas from educational psychology, self-study, human equity, technology, and more. You may eventually choose to exclude some of these elements from your teaching identity. However, it’s important to make informed decisions about these things. So for the duration of this course, I expect you to practice including these elements in your teaching identity.

A friend of mine calls this rule “no thank you bites.” Her children were picky eaters. When they didn’t like a meal, they didn’t have to eat it. But they did have to take one bite of each dish.

Confidence, Not Arrogance

I give a survey at the end of every course, asking for anonymous feedback on my teaching. At the end of one course, several students wrote that they were offended by my apparent arrogance, as a professor, as someone with a PhD, as an intellectual, or what-have-you. They felt I was talking down to them, or that I was dismissive of their beliefs about teaching if I didn’t share them. I deeply regretted leaving them with that impression.

I am surely guilty of having a large ego. As you grow into this profession, I hope you develop one as well. Like authors and actors, teachers need considerable self-confidence, because we are too-frequently judged, rejected, and even insulted. This job hits us hard where it hurts the most. Students, parents/guardians, and others will say and do things that cut. Sometimes we have only a minute to step into the staff bathroom, throw water on our face, and dry our hands. Then we have to walk into our next class with a smile. Self-confidence is what allows us to do that, so don’t view ego as an absolute flaw.

But I don’t want my ego to overshadow an important message. I believe there are many ways of being a good teacher, and there are many paths to becoming a good teacher. My path includes extensive use of technology, for example. Your path may be very different from mine. You may have very different beliefs, and that’s OK. For example, whether you think Vygotsky is brilliant or boring doesn’t make or break you as a teacher, in my eyes. A good teacher is prepared, present, and cares about the well-being and growth of his/her students. If you are those things, you have my respect and affection. This is something I’m working on, so I’d appreciate your feedback on how I’m doing (e.g., on the end-of-course survey).

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world: indeed; it's the only thing that ever has.

-Margaret Mead